

Understanding the root causes of violence and atrocity crimes
Speaking notes – Diane Ala'i

When we look at understanding the root causes of violence and atrocity crimes a concept that comes to mind is the idea of 'otherness'.

This 'otherness' very often stems from ignorance, so we do not only see the 'other' as separate from us, but the mere thought of it also raises suspicion. It thus becomes a breeding ground for spreading lies and creating myths. It is interesting to note that the lies that are spread are generally very well thought through and culturally designed to tap into primordial fears - spy of the enemy, related to sexual offenses, children, secret societies ... (and all the persecuted minorities can recognize these accusations).

Of course, hate speech is the ultimate form of this type of behaviour, but there are many shades of such acts that erode and strive to eliminate the most basic of our commonality which is the fact that we belong to one common humanity. For example, in the Special Rapporteur on cultural rights' report to the General Assembly last year on 'The writing and teaching of history' she states: 'Distortions of history teaching are not restricted to post-conflict societies. In many societies, history teaching either altogether ignores or carries, validates or strengthens stereotypes about marginalized groups, especially minorities and indigenous peoples, in addition to women and the poor.'

This otherness can then be used by 'Ethnic conflict entrepreneurs' – a term coined by Asbjorn Eide in 1993, or more recently what I would call 'religious exclusivity entrepreneurs'.

There is a lot of talk about situations of conflict, and rightly so given the present circumstances. But unfortunately atrocity crimes are not the exclusivity of conflicts, yet they get far less attention when they are regularly and relentlessly perpetrated.

The 'otherness' takes a special dimension when it is actually promoted by a government, when whatever means are available to a particular government are used to ostracize a minority.

Imagine a situation where:

- A government allows schoolteachers to discriminate and ridicule pupils belonging to a minority. Telling other pupils not to associate with them, or when they have to drink from a different water fountain than all the others - imagine being subjected to that when you are 6... 8...
- A government does not allow any youth from a particular minority to attend universities
- A government uses the concept of 'impurity' or 'uncleanliness' to forbid members of a minority to work in the public sector and exercise a certain number of professions in the private one
- A government does not allow members of a minority to bury their dead in a dignified manner, with name plates, to leave flowers on the graves of their loved ones, to beautify the wasteland given to them by planting trees
- and finally imagine that a government uses all the media it has at its disposal to spread false accusations against a particular minority.

Bleak Picture: this is the day to day reality of the Bahá'ís in Iran

The question that comes to mind: if you deprive members of a minority of access to education and employment, and do this relentlessly for decades, shouldn't it also be considered a mass atrocity? And more obviously, in such a situation, the grounds are set for all sort of violence to take place.

Very often governments claim that the otherness, and the violent acts that ensue from it, are not in their hands, despite their efforts to oppose it - and in Iran, in fact, it has just been the opposite, and we are witnessing more and more acts of solidarity from neighbours, co-workers, fellow-students, parents of pupils, etc.

There is a very easy and clear measuring tool for this: are perpetrators of acts of violence prosecuted? Whether a government clearly decides to give a strong signal that it opposes vigorously any such act and swiftly (and with justice - not by finding a quick scapegoat) identifies and prosecutes the perpetrators of such crimes. If it fails to do so, then it should be held equally as responsible as the perpetrators themselves.

Suggestion: use the adequate response of a state towards acts of violence as an indicator of its responsibility when these acts are perpetrated. This could also apply to cases of incitement to hatred.